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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAGUA 000473

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THE FSLN'S ATTEMPT TO DISCREDIT THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH BACKFIRES

REF: MANAGUA 443

Classified By: Ambassador Robert J. Callahan, Reasons 1.4 (b & d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On April 30, First Lady Rosario Murillo distributed a letter from presidential advisor Orlando Nunez to media outlets in which Nunez openly criticized Nicaragua's Catholic Church. According to Nunez, the Vatican considered the Nicaraguan church as one of the most corrupt in the world, and a majority of its bishops "had women and children." Nunez goes on to say that the Church has a confrontational approach against the governing Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). On May 4, the Catholic Church responded to the letter stating it was a "fictional essay" and a product of someone's creative imagination. The Church also asked that the government clarify the origin of the document. On May 5, Murillo then issued a statement claiming Nunez' letter was sent by "hackers." Despite the FSLN's attempt to deny responsibility, the party likely distributed the letter in an attempt to diminish the Catholic Church's influence in Nicaragua, but its attempt appears to have backfired. End Summary.

FSLN Attacks, the Church Responds

¶2. (C) Since entering into office in 2007, the Ortega government has directly attacked on a rotating basis foreign missions, non-governmental organizations, and the political opposition. However, its approach with the Catholic Church usually had been a bit more indirect. Rather than attack the Church directly, the government usually used the tactic of co-opting religious symbols to gain public support (reftel) or criticizing the Catholic hierarchy's comments on political issues (e.g., fraudulent elections). That approach, however, appeared to change on April 30 when the government distributed via electronic mail to media outlets a letter from presidential advisor Orlando Nunez to First Lady Rosario Murillo. The letter is titled "Relations Between the Church and the Sandinista Front" and is accompanied by a cover note signed by Murillo. In his letter, Nunez provides Murillo his assessment on church-state relations based on conversations he stated he had with Father Gregorio Raya of the Juigalpa Diocese (Department of Chontales).

¶3. (C) The three-page letter makes two basic arguments. First, Nunez paints the Catholic Church in Nicaragua as a corrupt institution. He claims that Pope Benedict XVI named a new auxiliary bishop to Managua to halt the corruption in

Nicaragua's Catholic Church, which Nunez claims the "Vatican considers one of the most corrupt (alcohol, money, and women)." A majority of the bishops in Nicaragua, Nunez continues, have "women and children" and "steal from donations made to Caritas." (Caritas is the Catholic Church's charitable organization.) Second, Nunez argues that the Church in Nicaragua is losing its prestige and authority among the population, particularly in the face of a strong and popular FSLN government. As a result, Nunez argues that the National Conference of Bishops (CEN by its Spanish initials) has a hostile position toward the government and takes every opportunity to challenge the authority of the government.

¶4. (SBU) In response to Nunez' letter, on May 4 the CEN held a press conference and read a statement addressed to Catholics. The CEN called Nunez' letter a "fictional essay" ("un ensayo de novela") and made four points: (1) the letter should be considered the product of imagination and far from the truth; (2) the CEN would request clarification on the origins of the document; (3) the CEN thanked Catholics for their confidence in their pastors and asked that the Church's unity be its strength; and (4) the CEN invited the Catholic people to pray for God's compassion and protection.

¶5. (SBU) On May 5 First Lady Rosario Murillo issued a statement claiming Nunez' letter was sent by computer hackers and was part of a larger conspiracy against the FSLN. However, Bishop Abelardo Mata from Esteli told media he doubted the "hacker" defense and questioned the government's slow response to the Nunez letter. A local newspaper's technical analysis of both messages (Nunez' letter and Murillo's defense) indicated that both were sent from the same computer network.

A Rogue Priest, A United Church

¶6. (C) Bishop of Granada Bernard Hombach told us he did not doubt that Nunez spoke with Father Raya, but stated the accusations against the CEN and the bishops were false. (Note: Bishop Hombach personally knows Father Raya, as Hombach was formerly the bishop of Juigalpa, the diocese to which Father Raya belongs.) Hombach described Raya as an opportunist who sought positions of influence with the government, something Raya had attempted with the previous two Nicaraguan governments. According to the Bishop of Granada, Father Raya created these stories to gain favor with the FSLN and Nunez took the bait. The governing FSLN, thinking it had good ammunition against the Church, then ran with the story and distributed it widely in Nicaragua.

¶7. (C) While most Nicaraguans do not appear to give the letter much credibility, members of the Church are concerned by the direct attack. Former CEN President and current Bishop of Leon Bosco Vivas told reporters that he believed this definitively marked the government's position against the Catholic Church. By contrast, Bishop Vivas told PolOff April 2 that the CEN was divided on how to engage with the government, arguing that he saw no reason to confront the government as long as the government did not directly attack the Church.

Comment

¶8. (C) More telling than the accusations in Orlando Nunez' letter against the Catholic Church is the fact that the governing FSLN decided to broadly distribute the document. This supports the widely held belief that the governing FSLN views the Church and its bishops as a competing authority in Nicaragua and would like nothing more than to diminish the influence of the country's Catholic hierarchy. With the release of the letter the FSLN might also have tried to preempt the positive news coverage the CEN is likely to receive when it hosts the Conference of Latin America's

Bishops in Managua on May 11-14.

19. (C) Whether or not the FSLN was duped by Father Raya, the fact that the party distributed a letter directly confronting the Catholic Church demonstrates the FSLN's inability to learn from past mistakes. Despite Murillo's denial of responsibility for the distribution of Nunez' note, the governing party's attempt to discredit the Church appears to have backfired. The CEN's position against the government seems more unified. As for trying to garner public support behind the government and against the Catholic hierarchy, the FSLN has an uphill battle. The latest polling shows the Church with a two to one approval rating over the president. The Catholic Church has a 65% approval rating; the presidency only 33%.

CALLAHAN